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ABSTRACT

During early settlement of the New World, schools were conducted in the community's native language. Concern over an official language for the United States can be traced to Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. While British immigrants were in the minority, their influence predominated. English-only laws appeared but were largely ignored. In 1900, many schools still taught in languages other than English, but the trend soon shifted to English-only instruction. Local influence submitted to national and international pressures for homogeneity, especially under Theodore Roosevelt. American Indians and African American slaves were the two most disenfranchised groups, while other ethnic groups had varying degrees of linguistic and cultural autonomy. "Scientific" debate over racial and linguistic superiority emerged at this time. Isolationism and xenophobia increased after World War I. Diversity gained ground after the overseas experiences of World War II, with the government increasing foreign language instruction in the armed forces and public schools and giving support for desegregation. Bilingual education pilot programs began in the early 1960s, when more liberal immigration policies came into effect. Federal support grew, then lessened in the 1980s, and at the same time a backlash against perceived gains of minority groups developed, including a push for English-only policy. (MSE)

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The History of Bilingual Education in America

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> Mainstream Americans appear to hold a double standard with regard to the value of bilingualism. On the one hand, knowledge of a second or foreign language is considered an asset for native English speakers in the United States. On the other hand, one sense that mainstream Americans do not consider bilingualism desirable for those whose native language is not English. (Zelasko, 1991, p. iii)

As far back as the 16th century, Dutch, French, British, and the Swedish carved out pockets of influence on the new American continent — fragile little colonies that had common culture and language. Flows of people entered North America in the early 1600s. The New World was seen as a safe haven for those who wished to escape oppression of all kind. These settlers and those who preceded and followed emigrated from the Old World for reasons of cultural and ethnic as well religious intolerance. These groups frequently set up homogeneous, often exclusionary communities in America to maintain culture, custom, and language. In so doing, they strengthened their political hold on these enclaves.

For more than two centuries, schools for the children from these non-English speaking communities reflected the language of the community itself. Schools were set up by the various ethnic groups to serve "their own." They taught a full range of academic subjects in the native language, including the teaching of English as an additional, subject. No fewer than seven language groups were represented in this early migration period and throughout the 19th century (Brisk, 1982). Education in the native tongue was the much accepted norm (Zelasko, 1991).

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There were the English on the Atlantic coast, the Germans from what is now New York to Georgia and the Midwest, the French on the North Atlantic coast from New England to Canada, Spaniards along the Gulf of Mexico from the Atlantic and further on to the Pacific Ocean, Dutch and Swedes in New York, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, and the Russians in Alaska and along the Pacific coast into California.

There were early conflicts as to what was to be the official language of the United States. Ben Franklin warned of the proliferation of German speakers in the Pennsylvania colony and its government before the Revolution, warning that "in a few years [interpreters] will also be necessary in the Assembly, to tell one-half of our legislators what the other half say" (Wagner, 1981, p. 30). While attempts to make non-English languages the "official" vehicle of government met with little success at the time. German lost that distinction by one vote in the Continental Congress. Nor did government convey that distinction on English. John Adams pushed for a national language academy of English, it was rejected by the new government, "deemed incompatible with the spirit of freedom in the United States" (Hakuta, 1986, p. 165). "[The Colonial] period represents the only time in America's history that the goal of native language programs was *bilingualism* for non-native speakers of English [author's emphasis]" (Zelasko, 1991, p. 121).

Of a total population by the early 19th century of 35 million inhabitants, only 5 million were from the British Isles. But, as Britain became a more imposing world power, its influence on this new nation

predominated. The Anglo-American alliance was necessary to avoid war with a French Republic under Napoleon which still held a large portion of the American continent. By the mid-1800s a number of political and economic factors was a catalyst for a change in public opinion to opposition of "foreigners": Chinese, Germans, Mediterraneans. Though "English only" laws that began to appear between 1830 and 1890, local governments frequently turned a "blind eye," (Perlmann, 1990) especially regarding the German language — the home tongue of the second largest immigrant group in the country at the time. In fact, beginning in the 1850s, many states passed laws prohibiting interference with home-language instruction or use in public schools. But, there remained a "Puritan" element contributing "significantly [to] building a society of a single culture," viewing with suspicion those different than the dominant group (Pai, 1990, p. 55).

With the end of the Civil War, African Americans were offered both freedom and resentment. Though free to live and vote as they wished, they met a disenfranchised South that was bitter and a worried North that reeled at the influx of these former slaves. While Black Americans of the time did speak English as their primary language, the racist discrimination against them spread to include many lighter-complected non-whites who had non-English home languages (Hakuta, 1986).

At the 20th century's turn, many schools still taught in the native language of the student. The custom was soon to change, however. German students were being persuaded away from private schools with — ironically — promises of bilingual education (which were seldom fulfilled.) American

Japanese had to petition federal courts to allow their children to attend regular English-only schools in San Francisco instead of "Chinese Schools." President Roosevelt interceded on behalf of those parents against the San Francisco school board, paving the way for the development of a national philosophy of opposition to schools of cultural difference. "In the cities, the formulation of language policy was a visible, contentious and important process" (Perlmann, 1990, p. 30).

Local initiatives began to give way to pressure from national and international pressures, taking on a broader and more inclusive complexion. Assigning patriotism to homogeneity, the President at once began to force a strong national identity — along with rampant neocolonialism. "[O]pposing dual-language instruction had a longer and fuller history by 1910 than they had had in 1840; and perhaps too, most of the later immigrant groups could not as easily appeal to the international prestige of their mother tongues" (Perlmann, p. 32). It was a state of competing interests and opinions that foreboded institutionalized ill treatments to come.

But the impact that any ethnic group had on government regulation and their own lives was a function of the political clout of that particular group. The two groups that can be easily considered the most disenfranchised in U.S. history, American Native Indians and African American slaves. American Indians were for many years required to "lose" their language and culture through legislation enacting such means as the notorious Indian Boarding Schools. Blacks fared little better. While transported across the Atlantic, they were separated aboard ship from other

speakers of their native languages so as to prevent conspiracy. While on American soil, they often had to resort to clandestine meetings where they practiced rituals and language of their culture. Contrast the official response to these groups with that of the accommodation given to the strong and influential German and French speakers in early America (Wagner, 1981). In between are those social and political influences which vary with the climate and with international affairs: the Spanish speakers, Chinese, Japanese, Polish, etc. (Coolidge, 1909). Taken *in toto* the strength of opposition to the use of a native language has consistently been a function of that group's political strength or weakness, and certainly not equitably proportioned.

It is essential to the understanding of the current bilingual education debate to know the strong influences on public opinion that arose during the first decades of the new century. A "scientific" debate over the superiority of certain races began at the same time with researchers and educators putting forth the proposition that bilinguals were inferior to monolinguals and that knowing a second language actually decreased academic learning. Led by the followers of French naturalist Jean Lamarck, the new Lamarckists (*née* Darwinists) in America were troubled by what they saw as an eminent "race suicide" of Anglos. Coined by University of Wisconsin sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross, the theory found succor in the mind and the instruction of Harvard professor Nathaniel Southgate Shaler. Shaler strongly believed in the development of an American race — to the extent of excluding non-white races from the country (Dyer, 1980, p. 144).

One of Shaler's students at Harvard would go on to be "foremost among the true believers in this doctrine [of race suicide, was] the American race theorist, amateur sociologist, and politician Theodore Roosevelt" (Dyer, p. 143). While Roosevelt distanced himself from some of Shaler's more extreme views (such as the acceptance of lynchings as a means of maintaining white supremacy) the shear vociferousness and abundance of the President's messages on race, Americanism, and xenophobia combined with the strength of office and his popularity began a trend of intolerance that swept through the country and exhibited itself in restrictive educational policy. The force of these combined events has left a legacy of bias through the century (Mosley, 1969). The metaphor might still be heard today that educator Ellwood Cubberly used in 1909 when he complained that America was "afflicted with a serious case of racial indigestion...their coming has served to dilute tremendously our national stock" (Cited in Tyack, 1967, p. 233). The public listened to the words of President Roosevelt and the mindset was in place; not unlike the tenure of another popular "bully pulpit" proselytizer, Ronald Reagan. Conceptions of certain languages (and therefore certain peoples) as uncivilized, somehow "heathen or pagan," certainly un-American, have been reinforced by such dictum (Fishman et al., 1985). The debate was then, and today is, being redefined. Divisions are set and condoned by the power structure at the expense of the small and the local entities.

America and the Republican congress of the 1920s yearned for "normalcy" after the Great War. This beginning to the long period of

isolationism on the global scale mirrored an inward-turning xenophobia in this country. The world was a cold, cruel place and only a population "100% American" could insure safety, that's why Teddy Roosevelt called America a "crucible" (Seldes, 1960). In the post-war anger of the time, those of German heritage in the U.S. were not allowed to teach their children in the native language (Hakuta, 1986). This reaction was not focused strictly on Germans, however.

The period between the two world wars marked an institutionalized intolerance to language diversity, with English instruction laws that forbade the use of all other languages in the classroom. In 1940 and again in 1950 U.S. immigration laws were changed to require English proficiency to enter into this country (Hakuta).

On return from foreign shores after World War II, having seen a wider world and having been accepted by it, American ethnic enlisted forces had a new hope that a society could be set up to accept diversity. Having been victorious in that war, the U.S. government had a new role to play and a new appreciation for the value of communicating with that worldwide diversity. The government went about a program of intensive foreign language instruction in the armed forces and in American schools. The minorities began a hard-fought battle to elicit constitutional rights to equality — including equality in education.

The Supreme Court ruling in *Brown* vs The *Board of Education* (1954) found segregation to be unconstitutional, overturning the nearly sixty years of the "separate but equal" treatment in education allowed by *Plessy* vs

Ferguson (1895). By the mid-1960s the Civil Rights Act (1964) provided federal funds to school districts that complied with desegregation orders. During the same period, the Soviet Union sent into orbit the first artificial satellite, *Sputnik*. In response, the U.S. government created the National Defense Education Act (NDEA, 1958), authorizing grants to schools for math, science, and foreign language instruction, tying funding to national educational objectives. A flood of refugees fleeing Fidel Castro's takeover of Cuba impacted the school system in Southern Florida.

Bilingual education pilot programs were funded by the federal government and private foundations in the early 1960s. In an attempt to attack poverty, the federal government strengthened the Civil Rights Act with educational legislation through the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This act "more than any other legislation, made categorical funding a method for shaping local educational actions according to a particular political and social philosophy" (Spring, 1991, p. 192). As well, across the country, a new immigration policy — the Immigration Act of 1965 — removed the quota system that had been in effect since 1924. This too allowed for a surge in immigrant population in the U.S.. Bilingual education became a political issue as "assimilists" or "nativists" of the old school who wanted a single American culture faced off against "pluralists" who wanted these new Americans to maintain their own language and traditions while functioning in the majority culture (Spring, 1991, p. 145).

The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 and the Supreme Court ruling in *Lau* vs *Nichols* (1974) cemented the rights of non-English speakers or to

access the core curriculum in a manner and mode accessible to the student. In many cases this meant cost and commitment — two factors that determine support for a program. It was a formative decade that gave notice of a new consciousness raising awareness of the value of ethnic diversity and a demand for *meaningful* access to equal educational opportunity. The federal influence exerted in the debate was, for a time, a factor in the growth and acceptance of bilingual education during the 1960s and 70s. The legacy of the period is a federal government with critical influence over local initiatives, but whose official position — especially in regard to bilingual education — has shifted. In 1974, for the first time since its implementation, four percent of the funds for Title VII (of the ESEA) were diverted to English-based alternative programs. By 1988 that number increased to 25%.

The trend of the 1980s was a lessening of federal support and influence of many educational programs. This came about through reduction of funding and by reducing the role of federal support agencies. Even anti-bilingual education organizations acknowledge lack of leadership from Washington for the bilingual programs (U.S. English: Adult, undated), which have been, arguably, abandoned in favor of "local control." A backlash against the perceived "excessive" gains of minorities at the expense of the white majority became a strident and vocal opposition to non-English language instruction in the classroom and non-English languages in government documents, including election ballots (U.S. English: Who's Who, 1989). This opposition has gained strength, creating organizations English First! and

U.S. English, and regional counterparts such as California's Learning English Advocates Drive. Those opposing bilingual education continue the onslaught and are buttressed by the new spate of recently published books: Arthur Schlesinger's The Disuniting of America (1991), Rosalie Porter's Forked Tongue (1990), Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind (1987). These and other writings sometimes characterize supporters of bilingual education as "wrong-thinking demagogues...who now constitute an entrenched bureaucracy, plac[ing] politics, ideology, and self-interest ahead of effective education" (Porter, p. 83) or at least "naive... anti-English...leftist liberals," who base their beliefs on "jobs and money" for themselves, "looking for ways to pry money out of the taxpayer." (Banks, 1990, p. 63).

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